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## **MY GARDEN STATE: MEMORY, HISTORY AND THE AGRARIAN IDEAL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This essay examines the dynamic tension between the memory of lived experience and the formal discipline of history as it applies to the value of farm life and the importance of the agrarian ideal in American society. It analyzes the author's memories about growing up in rural New Jersey, their critical place in her development as a scholar, and their embeddedness in her moral valuation of rural experience. Simultaneously it conveys the limits of those memories when held against critical analysis, especially in relation to the lenses of gender and race. It suggests that the longstanding appeal of the agrarian ideal—"the garden state"—remains so strong in our American collective memory that it can discourage appreciation for contingency and difference.

Most people regard New Jersey as one big suburban nightmare replete with hyper-inflated real estate prices and bloodcurdling traffic. Yet I have always loved this place long called "the Garden State." I grew up in the countryside, among dairy and horse farms, where fields and forests rolled down to the Delaware River. This corner of the world remained wedded to its past, including the Dutch, English, German, and Swede settlers who arrived in the seventeenth century, and the freedom-seeking Quakers, Presbyterians, Moravians, and Methodists who subsequently followed them. In our neck of the woods we presumed all our agrarian forebears were patriots who crossed the Delaware with George Washington or fought at the Battle of Monmouth. We believed we were the true heirs of America's hard-won independence, and our commitment to the land was a living symbol of our pride in our American heritage.

The experiences I gained from growing up in New Jersey farm country, and the meanings I have attached to that experience, have profoundly shaped what I believe and how I think and act today. As a professor of U.S. history, with expertise in southern history, I always begin my courses by asking if anyone has had farm experience. Rarely do my suburbanites answer positively these days. I subsequently offer my own experiences as the garden state girl to infuse a healthy dose of veracity into the world of ideas I am offering my students. However, herein lies the rub.

I believe I can make a compelling argument about the value of my farm experience for understanding the American past. Simultaneously, my identity as a scholar gives me critical tools with which to challenge the very memories that make

up that farm experience, and the value system I think I acquired from it. This essay examines the dynamic tension between that memory of my lived experience and the formal discipline of history as applied to the value of farm life. My quandary turns on the relationship between the meaningfulness I extract from my memories and my knowledge as a scholar that my “remembering” is inherently selective and self-serving. This essay suggests the power of the agrarian ideal to shape the meaning I have crafted from my rural remembrances, and the ways academic analysis has helped me recast and even challenge what I have considered my foundational perceptions.

There is moral value in knowing about farm life. I grew up among working farms in the 1960s and 1970s. My earliest memories center on the rhythms of the agrarian world. Susie Hartung and I herded the milk cows, supervised the milking machines, and bottle-fed calves before grade school. By middle school I was putting up hay with the Jones family in sweltering heat, the dust choking down my throat, the chaff gluing itself to my sweaty back.

Despite the hard work farming demanded, I knew I was living in a kind of garden state. Although initially my farm experiences were acquired largely through friendships with neighbors, my family soon acquired a small horse farm of its own. I spent my adolescence mucking, feeding, grooming, riding, doctoring, and fixing fence. I joined 4-H and Pony Club. The feed mill owner, the hay farmers, the farrier, the veterinarian, the horse trainers and breeders, and the extension agents formed our new community. I learned habits of industry and responsibility, found wonder in my animals and their exploits, and grew respectful of the glories and power of nature.

I recognized intuitively at the time that this world nurtured a special kinship to the natural world and a strong social web too. I lived in a community keenly shaped by a strong sense of itself. When I was seven, the local village mustered a week-long bicentennial to honor its founding by Moravians in 1768. We Girl Scouts studied the Leni Lenape Indians who had once “occupied” our land, and we cleaned the litter from the river banks to stave off pollution. All the adults belonged to the County Democrats. We were a close-knit people and we were proud of it. Our shared pursuits of farming and civic involvement literally fostered our strong community (Chan and Elder 2001). In the *annus terribilis* of 1968, when assassinations, race riots, cultural conflicts and the Vietnam War rocked the U.S., my fourth grade classmates and I, oblivious to this string of national crises, belted out a composition of our own making over local radio: “Warren County is a big

county/ Warren County's where we live/ We raise crops and flowers and cows/  
To the cities these products we give."

My parents expected me to attend college somewhere else, but even during high school I remained attached to this place I called home. Nonetheless, I felt the pull of higher education, which was not unique among rural families like mine at this time and place (McGrath, Swisher, Elder, and Conger 2001). I expected to graduate with a set of skills that would allow me to return to my countryside, and at the least work at a profession that would allow me to follow my true vocation as a farmer. However, at a university in a major city half way across the country I fell in love with academe. I could argue that I never completely turned my back on my upbringing because I chose to study the past in a region of the country distinguished by its ruralness—the American South. Yet if I am being honest I decided as a young adult that my true avocation was scholarship. Considering that transformation from citizen-farmer to teacher-scholar invites me to embroider the fraying memories of my rural experiences with bright threads from academe.

That these two identities are not mutually exclusive should come as no surprise. Few Americans, whether or not they consider themselves intellectuals, can escape our grand national memory about our agrarian origins (Thelen 1990). This powerful legend turns on the idea that America's historic greatness as a land of freedom rests upon the strength of character and moral commitment secured by generations of men and women working the land. I am certain I had internalized this national myth before I could talk, so central was it to the world in which I grew up. Your average American probably cannot cite the specific passages in J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's (1782) *Letters from an American Farmer* or Thomas Jefferson's (1788) *Notes on the State of Virginia* that articulate this ideal, but even post-modern, electronics-wielding urban dwellers know its basic tenets. Our popular culture still celebrates them. No wonder then that scholars in the social sciences and humanities continue to assign the agrarian political philosophers, who wrote eloquently about how a godly, industrious, and independent people were rewarded with prosperity in this fertile and abundant land. Self-reliance and first-generation wealth nurtured an egalitarian society, a natural aristocracy, characterized by integrity and democratic government. Who cannot be moved by Jefferson's famous soliloquy on farmers? "Cultivators of the earth," he wrote to John Jay, "are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to it's liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds" (Jefferson 1785/1984: p. 818). Only farmers, as self-sufficient landholders, the bulk of that new republic's

MEMORY, HISTORY AND THE AGRARIAN IDEAL

31

population, the first moral majority, held the ethical capital that could stop merchants, bankers, businessmen and speculators from bending politicians to their self-serving ends and undermining democracy in the process. More so than any other social group, farmers cultivated greatness in the American citizenry (Hurt 1994).

As a young scholar I understood, based on my own rural experiences, the rhetoric of this agrarian ideal and I charted its significance in shaping democratic parties and sustaining egalitarian discourse in nineteenth- and twentieth-century politics. I championed the Jacksonians, the Granger Movement, the Populists, and the New Deal Democrats, and cheered when modern-day farmers rode their tractors on the Mall in Washington, D.C. But as intellectual inquiry has a way of doing, my continuing education began to make me uncomfortable with this perhaps too convenient marriage of my head and heart, of the discipline of history and the memories of my own past.

The first major blow to my implicit understanding of the virtues of the agrarian world, past and present, occurred when I discovered women's deliberate exclusion from American citizenship. Starting with the decision of the founding fathers to throw the consolation prize of "republican motherhood" to the new nation's patriotic females, and continuing through Frederick Douglass's warning to women's rights advocates to back off their fight for suffrage because "this was the Negro's hour," American men understood U.S. citizenship as an inherently "male" privilege that reflected their independence and authority. As I read the sources and the scholarship more deeply, moreover, I was taken aback by the degree to which women's work in the agrarian household went largely unrecognized by scholars. Yet women's efforts, backbreaking and nearly round the clock, were essential to the farm family's survival (and success). Even worse, I determined that female wage labor had been (and has remained) woefully underpaid. Rural women never earned enough to support themselves, let alone their families.

This academic understanding pressed me to re-evaluate my own rural experiences in gendered terms. Suddenly I saw a set of patterns about my past I had never appreciated before. In the middle of fifth grade my friend's dad, a dairy farmer, had dropped dead of a massive heart attack. He had left behind a widow and two young sons, land poor with mountainous debt, to make out a hard scrabble living short one critical head of household. Mrs. Van Horn, who I remember only as soft-spoken, matronly and gray-haired, although she cannot have been particularly old, reneged on that plan, selling the family farm in a heartbeat and moving her children far away. Six years later, our hard-working neighbor, Mr.

Schmidt, who planted corn and rye for his beef cows on his neat, well-manicured farm, even managing to turn a small profit, had an aneurysm. At age 39, he lay in the hospital on life support, until his lively, attractive wife ordered the machines shut down. She too sold out, departing with her three sons, the oldest of whom was my dear friend, for parts unknown.

At the time those terrible deaths, altered family trajectories, and truncated friendships taught me hard lessons about life's ephemeral nature. Yet what strikes me now is the meaning behind these newly widowed women's decisions to pull up stakes. In both these families, and in others I knew but was not as personally invested, the death of the father signaled the end of the farm. These women elected not to pursue their mate's vocation, instead dramatically changing their lives and those of their children. Scholarship shows us this may be a twentieth-century development (Sachs 1983). Historians studying the settlement of the western frontier in the nineteenth century have long remarked upon the resilience of women settlers, especially the unmarried and widowed. Combing through property and tax records as well as personal journals, diaries and letters, they discovered that wives and daughters who lost husbands and fathers on the Great Plains and west of the Rockies managed to hold on to the land and eke out a living. For them, farm life offered an independence, personal as well as economic, that was well worth the many risks involved, especially when the alternatives did not look so good. Unless they resorted to dance halls and prostitution, most rural women with limited education had no means to support themselves in cities or towns.

By the twentieth century, however, and especially as the family farm became an endangered species, ever more women expressed dissatisfaction with rural life. Farm daughters fled their predestined futures as farm wives by enrolling in state teacher's colleges at the turn of the century (Trelease 2003). When they did stay on the farm, technological innovation gave them opportunities to stretch their world. When farmers in the mid-West purchased trucks to facilitate their work in the 1930s and 1940s, farm women most relished them. Instead of leading relatively isolated lives, they created a new routine by driving back and forth to town so their children could attend school, by picking up a repaired tractor part for their husband, or by selling eggs at the store. Along the way, they visited friends and relatives, and checked out books at the library (Jellison 1993). The joy these women expressed at having this new degree of mobility and choice is startling, a harsh reminder of how restricted they had come to perceive their role on the farm in the age of modernity.

Historians of the twentieth-century South have also observed that farm women, white and black, were often unhappy. Land did not drive their imaginations or

determine their identity the way it did their men folk. Some women viewed the farm as a kind of prison. Mothers even urged their daughters to go to the cities. Unmarried young women fled the rural South for urban wage work in droves, making up the largest single group of migrants in the region between 1900 and 1935 (Kyriakoudes 2003). When I think of the suddenly widowed women I knew, and the rapidity with which they discarded their family farms, I wonder if they too had felt incarcerated in their rural worlds. Did the death of their husband offer them a freedom they had never imagined owning at that stage in their lives? Does the disparity between perceptions about men's and women's roles on these mid-twentieth-century farms, in the midst of a national social revolution that included the women's movement, offer a much fuller and more complex way to explain the actions of these women I once knew, and others like them (Wells 2002)? Because I was a child when I knew farm life, and was given all the autonomy and freedom to explore that world regardless of my sex, I never experienced its gendered limitations. Despite my submersion in this community, and my relationships with many farm women and their children, I had not been attuned enough to know what wives made of their gendered lives, good or bad. It is telling that I never imagined myself in their shoes, but instead envisioned running my own farm when I grew up.

Historians believe that the study of memory is an essential entry into the past because it often explains what social reality felt like, especially regarding ordinary people, far better than traditional documents. Memory is not history, but we can explore the meanings of memory and use that exploration to shape how we write about the past. Hence individual and collective memory is an absolutely critical source in all historical work (Blight 2000).

Historians rarely articulate how their own memories, as opposed to the memories of others, shape how they themselves make sense of the past. Yet academe has pressed me to analyze my memories, not as a psychoanalyst, but in the pursuit of scholarly truth about myself and about the past. This work has revealed my blindness to realities I now consider central to my work as a historian and to my life as a citizen. As a girl I found my life on the farm and in the world liberating in all kinds of ways. I relished the strength of my body before Title IX guaranteed sports programs for girls, riding my horses miles from home for hours at a time with no fear for my physical safety. During summertime, after I finished the morning chores, I dreamt and read across times, places and cultures under giant oak trees with cows grazing nearby.

Yet at night, watching national news with my family, I felt assaulted by a contemporary world I could not fathom. U.S. soldiers fought communist guerillas

in Vietnam, while angry hippies demanded peace. Assassins killed one American leader after another. Police officers in masks threw tear gas and unleashed snarling German shepherds on crowds of people, black and white. When I witnessed footage of black Newark residents throwing bricks through store front windows and running pell-mell down urban streets, my garden state idyll finally burst. Newark was little more than an hour's drive away. How could my ordered rural community, with its good citizens and civic clubs, its modest farms and businesses, its fairgrounds and festivals, prosper while my urban neighbors raged? What did race mean anyway? Why, I began asking my teachers, were there no black people in our county and no black children in our schools? Mrs. Larson informed me our school had in fact enrolled "a lively little black boy once." I was not precocious. I simply could not understand the stark contrast between my world and the one I saw on T.V. It took an iconoclastic nun who taught contemporary black poetry in high school to help me find some answers, setting me on the path toward graduate school and the study of the American South.

Still, why did I have to study the history of race and race relations in a different region of the country as a young adult to begin to understand the binary world of my youth? I had presumed that white people lived in the country and black people lived in the city, because I saw so few African Americans. On family vacations to Atlantic City, I watched elderly black men push white couples in wheeled chairs on the boardwalk. When I went to Manhattan, I saw black men shining white men's shoes. I knew nothing about the history of slavery and its presence in all thirteen colonies, and its evolution in the plantation South, nor anything about incipient racism in the North before and after the Civil War, or the horrors of Reconstruction and Jim Crow for African Americans. I had no idea what the Great Migration was, or the century's long struggle for civil rights embedded in black churches, associations and labor unions, or the profound socioeconomic effects of second class citizenship on most black Americans. I did watch Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral on television. I was fascinated by the mules that pulled the wagon bearing his hearse, but I had no idea why this was a public event. The race riots that summer left me deeply puzzled, with the haunting sense that something unjust had triggered black unrest. What I did not recognize at the time, but what is clear to me now, is that my family and my world were part of a society in the throes of transformation (Salamon 2003).

Some historians would simply label this development the maturation of industrialization in America. Scholars have been writing about the movement from farm to city for decades. They have debated the pros and cons of the first super



MEMORY, HISTORY AND THE AGRARIAN IDEAL

35

subdivisions like Levittown, where proto-developers created suburbs by turning a few thousand acres of potato fields into affordable homes on postage stamp lots. Everyone knows today's "burbs" reflect an ever-expanding sprawl of homogenized housing, blacktop, neon-emblazed strip malls, soccer fields and corner convenience stores, providing work for architects, corporations, lawn mowing services, Molly Maids, and post-modern critics alike. Scholars even document "the return" of African-American families from the North to newly affluent black suburbs in the South (Falk, Hunt, and Hunt 2004).

In the 1960s and 1970s, suburbanization in central and northwestern New Jersey began with the sale of farmland to independent developers eager to throw up a "spec" house (for speculation by a developer, as opposed to a custom-designed house) on ten or fifteen acres to sell to farmer wannabes like my family. The post-World War II affluence that spawned a new middle class in America had finally spilled over into the rural world, reversing the earlier flow of migration from farm to city. The wealthiest of this new class, unable to buy into the landed estates of Essex County, bought up farmland in our neck of the woods. Their spanking new horse properties, which served as their weekend retreats, were sandwiched between older working farms and new mini-farmsteads. Today I understand that despite our class differences, we were trying to perpetuate an idealized rural life because we lived in a society stunned by change.

Traditional farming in post-modern America is an endangered species. This observation is nothing new. The acquisition of farm acreage for development has been the topic of hundreds of articles and dozens of books, including Jane Smiley's (1991) Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*. The process is similar throughout the country, but has taken off at the speed of light in the Sunbelt South. The dairy and horse farms of Alpharetta have become the bedroom suburbs of Atlanta. Although Georgia and Texas have led the conversion of farmland to suburb since the 1980s, North Carolina, Louisiana and Florida remain close behind (Hurt 2002).

When developers have come calling, it is hardly surprising that farmers have considered their lucrative offers. Three quarters of all farms generate profits of less than \$50,000. The inability to make money has pressed half of all farmers into dual careers. Not surprisingly, farming has become a "graying" occupation, with twenty farmers over the age of 55 for everyone less than 35 (Jager 2004). Yet some farmers have worked hard to adapt to the new world they are encountering, and have been successful in doing so. Ten years ago, a third-generation farmer in Mt. Airy, NC convinced his father to give up their standard corn and soybean crops. Now they

plant timothy and alfalfa hay to sell to horse owners across the state. Their new crop requires less fertilizer and less labor, substantially reduces chemical run off, and generates a good profit. In a part of the country where horse owners must track down hay supplies nationally (buying up lots from Michigan and Ohio) and even internationally (from Canada), this farmer has found a significant local niche that allows him to maintain the family farm. Even today, 98 percent of all farms are family owned. If the family farm is to sustain itself and fend off developers, it must demonstrate both flexibility and market savvy (Hurt 1992). Ironically such “modern” expectations have long characterized farming in America, if historians like Christopher Clark (1992) are correct in insisting on the proto-capitalistic mentality of the eighteenth-century farmer.

However, the agrarian ideology that celebrated traditional family farms and their relationship to democracy is undergoing a significant transition. American agriculture has survived tremendous transformations over the past three centuries, but perhaps none faster than the one right now. The stereotypical farmsteads of my childhood memory are virtually extinct, having been replaced by huge agribusinesses responsive to biotechnology and the demands (and competition) generated by global markets. Federal farm programs have dried up. Consumer preferences reflect an older, more suburban, more ethnically diverse population that insists on convenience, choice, safety and affordability. Agriculture has become more industrialized and dependent on new technologies, requiring extensive investments in capital and knowledge. Farmers must prepare to feed double the current global population over the next fifty years, and simultaneously establish farming practices that produce safer and healthier foods less destructive to the environment. The rural world in which I came of age, where I learned a certain set of agrarian values that continue to shape my life, is under siege on many fronts. Market demands, access to capital, the climbing price of real estate, the out and out corporatism—all have taken their toll on “the garden state.” Yet so too has our intellectual arsenal. Examining rural worlds through the lenses of gender and race exposes complexities and contradictions that challenge our memories and press us to a deeper honesty.

Mark Kurlansky (2006) recently opined that in just over 200 years our great country has become “the most backward democracy in the West” (p. B15). He points to the collapse of our healthcare system, the huge and still escalating disparities between rich and poor, the failure of our public school system to serve all Americans, and the declining benefits reserved for our workers. Not only is our foreign policy and immigration law the scourge of the entire world, but global

citizens increasingly look elsewhere for progressive ideas. The powerful rhetoric of the agrarian ideal, coupled with a relatively stable community culture, may be a dangerous thing if it blinds folks to their privileges and to the existence of substantive social inequities. We must take care not to romanticize the agrarian past even as we herald it. Americans have always loved to extol the superiority of our virtues. If I could go back in time to the rural New Jersey of my youth, knowing what I know now, I would look much harder for the people who challenged my “garden state,” who dissented from its inherent order and stability, who saw the larger cultural and social problems exposed by fleeing widows and rioting blacks. Do not get me wrong. That old Jeffersonian spirit and its insistence on the moral value of the agrarian world still runs deep in my veins. I know that my agrarian world taught me discipline and responsibility, values I still hold dear as an academic, a teacher, a citizen, and a parent.

Nevertheless, the danger of the agrarian world in fact lies in its utopic appeal. Thomas Jefferson, the king of democracy himself, never believed the agrarian world he idealized had to be suspended in amber. He thought human beings had the innate capacity to be more progressive over time, and must be from one generation to another. Hence he predicted slavery's end, extolled religious freedom, and championed public schools, a true radical in his thought, if not in all his actions. Jefferson knew that only by challenging the status quo could progress happen. We need to transform our own agrarian ideal, our own penchant for the garden state, into a dynamic, contested image that better conveys a rural world shaped by contingency and difference (Abbot 1991; Aminzade 1992). Rethinking that ideal could cultivate a powerful dialogue able to drive progressive change at this critical moment in history. Tilly's (2005) insightful work on social ties and identities is instructive here. Critically examining my own past has made me see that rewriting the American agrarian ideal to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century is as morally urgent as it is intellectually imperative.

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MEMORY, HISTORY AND THE AGRARIAN IDEAL

39

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